

Gender and DRR

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You would be mistaken if you think that disasters affect everyone equally. They don't. I find that, when I ask "who is vulnerable?" the answer is often "everyone", but this answer misses the frightening reality – some are more vulnerable than others. Perhaps the question is wrong; and the better question is "who is *most* vulnerable?".

It is not only a matter of *where* you are ('exposure'), but also *who* you are. Even with equal exposure, some people tend to pay more than others.

Who?

According to research conducted in 2007, natural disasters on average kill more women than men... The stronger the disaster, the stronger this effect on the gender gap¹.

Two examples:

- The Bangladesh cyclone of 1991 killed between 138,000² and 150,000³ people. 90% of the casualties were women and children.
- The 2004 South-East Asian tsunami killed some 220,000 people. Oxfam found that up to 4 times more women died than men.

WHO research shows that women constitute up to 80% of refugee and displaced populations worldwide, and in emergency situations women and children may typically make up 70 to 80% of those needing assistance.

It is not only during disasters, but also in the aftermath, where we find gender differences; chiefly in the increase in sexual gender based violence, particularly when families have been displaced and are living in overcrowded emergency or transitional housing where they lack privacy. Reasons include men's loss of control in the aftermath of a disaster, and women adopting new strategies for survival that can place them at risk.

Gender roles dictate that women become the primary caretakers for those affected by disasters – including children, the injured and sick, and the elderly – substantially increasing their emotional and material work load⁴. With the substantial increase in household workload it can force many girls to drop out of school and help with chores⁵.

However, women and girls are not a homogenous group, a range of factors such as poverty, age, ethnicity, caste, disability, geographical location and HIV status will play their part alongside gender. It is important to recognize that disasters intensify all existing inequalities.

¹ http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=874965

² wikipedia

³ IFRC

⁴ http://www.wikigender.org/index.php/Women_and_Disasters

⁵ Davis et al 2005

Why?

A study by the London School of Economics (LSE) analysed disasters in 141 countries and concluded that gender differences in loss of lives due to natural disasters are directly linked to women's economic and social rights. The study also found that in societies where women and men enjoy equal rights, losses in lives due to natural disasters were more gender balanced⁶.

Reasons for the higher female mortality in Bangladesh has been shown to be about cultural norms: "... partly because women were not informed about the threat of a cyclone, as warning information was transmitted by men to men in public spaces... Women were not allowed to leave the houses without a male relative and many perished waiting for their relatives to return home and take them to a safe place⁷" and those who did were unable to swim in the flood waters⁸.

Similarly, during the 2004 South East Asian Tsunami, values of nudity and shame prevented women from running to safety as their clothes had been removed by the waves. These women preferred to drown in the waters than be rescued naked by men⁹. Further reasons given for the higher death toll in the tsunami include "... they stayed behind to look for their children and other relatives; men more often than women can swim; men more often than women can climb trees¹⁰".

The extreme poor are often more vulnerable to disasters and it is recognised that people's vulnerability to risks depends to a large extent on levels of poverty and the assets that they have available. Women and girls constitute 70% of the global poor and the combination of poverty and prescribed gender roles, lack of access to and control over resources and exclusion from claiming basic entitlements increase women and girls vulnerability and undermine their ability to cope with the impacts of disasters.

What we can do about it

The first step is recognising the problem, closely linked to doing a proper risk analysis. We must understand, as much as possible, the dynamics of inequality before, during and after disasters so that we can address not only the broad needs of the affected population, but also the specific needs of certain groups. Conflicts and natural disasters have differentiated impacts on women, girls, boys, men and older people, so it is key to collect data about/ from each different group¹¹

In Bangladesh, women suffer from reproductive health issues during floods that men simply don't get, and are quite likely not to even think about – so we must listen to the women and act accordingly. In East Timor women are likely to be in villages during storms, which are full of fruit trees; falling coconuts and branches pose a real threat to them.

Once we have identified the problems, we must do something about them – addressing specific needs in plans is one important step, as is challenging power dynamics between men and women. Other examples of things we can do include

⁶ <http://www22.lse.ac.uk/geographyAndEnvironment>

⁷ http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/reducing_risks/194300-Empowering-communities-to-prepare-for-cyclones.pdf

⁸ http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/Climate_Change_DFID.pdf

⁹ <http://www.eldis.org/vfile/upload/1/document/0812/Gnder%20sensitive%20disaster%20management%20Toolkit.pdf>

¹⁰ http://www.preventionweb.net/files/1502_bn050326tsunamiwomen.pdf

¹¹ Gender and Development Vol. 20 No 2, July 2012

making shelters disabled friendly (wheelchair access, for example), and ensuring men and women are segregated in cultures where this is important. Committees should identify and provide special assistance for those that need it – disabled and elderly people, children and so on. Health centres and schools need special attention given their role in communities and disasters.

In addition to meeting practical needs we should be looking out for opportunities to address strategic gender needs. In some instances opportunities for positive change in disasters can be harnessed, enabling men and women to take on new and more progressive gender roles - for example when men have to share caring responsibilities, or when women assume prominent roles in peace building and mediation.

Recommendations

- Promote meaningful participation of women in disaster and climate risk management, including in leadership roles
- Utilise inclusive gender sensitive community consultations that engage women and men, young and old to ensure that responses meet actual and not perceived needs
- Collect and maintain gender and age disaggregated data
- Ensure that your gender sensitive analysis informs programme design and implementation.
- Utilise international and national policies and institutional mechanisms to raise and promote the rights of women and girls in disaster response and preparedness
- For long term change that transforms the lives of women and men living in poverty, programmes need to tackle the gender inequalities that shape women's and men's roles responsibilities and status

Conclusion

Programmes that ensure that women as well as men are fully involved in planning DRR strategies and are full participants in recovery efforts are more likely to succeed. Disaster response strategies that protect and assist women as well as men are better for the community as a whole. A gender-sensitive approach is a smart approach in that it enables the resources of all members of an affected community to be fully utilised. This is particularly important in preparing for and responding to disasters, as these tend to magnify existing inequalities between women and men. We need to think beyond 'women as victims' to 'women as agents'.

Some extra reading can be found here:

- Concern's experiences from Pakistan and Bangladesh on engaging women in leadership positions for disaster preparedness and community adaptation to climate change:
<http://intranet/People/SAL/PALU/approaches/Equality/Equality%20Activities%20Worldwide/Womens%20Day%20Booklet%202013%20FINAL.pdf>
- Oxfam's training pack on gender and DRR:
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/gender-and-disaster-risk-reduction-a-training-pack-136105>
- The Gender and Disaster Sourcebook:
<http://www.qdnonline.org/sourcebook/>